

Investigating English Language Anxiety among UiTM Sarawak Undergraduates

Vicky Chin

vickychin@sarawak.uitm.edu.my

Academy of Language Studies

Universiti Teknologi MARA UiTM (Sarawak), Malaysia

Ting Hie Ling

tinghieling@sarawak.uitm.edu.my

Academy of Language Studies

Universiti Teknologi MARA UiTM (Sarawak), Malaysia

Yeo Jiin Yih

yeoji242@sarawak.uitm.edu.my

Academy of Language Studies

Universiti Teknologi MARA UiTM (Sarawak), Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Second or foreign language learning can be a demanding task for many language learners. One of the essential factors is the existence of anxiety. In relation to this, the present study aims to investigate the level of English language anxiety experienced by university students as well as to identify the factors that lead to such anxiety. The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) which is developed by Horwitz et al. (1986) was administered to 149 first year Diploma students. Data analysis on the FLCAS items were analysed using SPSS 22. The findings revealed that majority of the students experienced a moderate level of English language anxiety with anxiety of English classes being the main factor which contributed to the respondents' language learning anxiety, followed by fear of test, communication/ speech apprehension and finally fear of negative evaluation. The study also indicated that most of the students were unmotivated to attend English classes and unproductive in preparing language tests. Nevertheless, majority of the students perceived themselves as confident and not anxious when speaking with native English speakers. The findings from this study provide pedagogical implications to the English as second language (ESL) practitioners and could potentially assist instructors in alleviating debilitating anxiety which in turn can yield better learning outcomes.

Keywords: English language; anxiety; undergraduates; factors of language anxiety

INTRODUCTION

Poor grasp of the English language among Malaysian university graduates has always been the concern of education policy makers since the past decade. The possible reasons for the abysmal

standard of English in the Malaysian education system are educators' poor language teaching, whose own English proficiency is limited (Ee, 2012), prevalent usage of Bahasa Melayu in learning other subjects (Asri Selamat, Ahmad Esa, Shamsaadal Sholeh Haji Saad & Asliaty Atim, 2011), inappropriate teaching methods (Mosha, 2014), shifts in medium of instruction (Suraya Kamarudin & Juriah Long, 2014) and inapt assessment method (Thongma Souriyavongsa, Sam Rany, Mohamad Jafre Zainol Abidin & Leong, 2013). Nevertheless, researchers have underlined another important underlying factor – the language learning anxiety (Darmi & Albion, 2012).

Language anxiety is defined as “the feelings of tension and nervous when associating with second language or foreign language contexts that include speaking, listening and learning” (Onwuegbuzie, Bailey & Daly 1999, p.218). The level of anxiety can determine students' interests in the language class and also to promote or hinder their language learning performances. Lack of comfort, excessive self-evaluation, and worry over potential failure and concern over the opinion of others can affect students' performances on language tasks (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986). This debilitating anxiety causes the learners “to flee the new learning task and stimulates the individual emotionally to adopt avoidance behavior” (Scovel, 1978, p. 139). While it can be detrimental, anxiety in itself may not necessarily have a negative effect on language. Facilitating anxiety motivates the learners “to ‘fight’ the learning task and gears the learners emotionally for approach behavior” (Scovel, 1978, p. 139). The moderate level of anxiety is considered as an asset that motivates students to perform a task. In this regard, anxiety plays a significant part in determining students' language learning performance.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

English is the medium of instruction of Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). All the reference textbooks are in English except for the Islamic State and Societies subject. In addition, all the diploma students are required to pass three levels of English proficiency courses in order to graduate. In reference to the curriculum for English language courses offered in UiTM, students are expected to acquire the listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in the social and academic contexts. In addition, some language activities such as oral presentation, group discussions and role-plays require students to perform in front of the class. Students will be assessed in terms of communicative ability, language use and task fulfillment which is part of the overall assessment. Given to that, students could encounter certain level of anxiety when it comes to English language learning. It is, therefore, pertinent to examine UiTM students' perceptions towards English language anxiety.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the study are to:

1. investigate the level of anxiety experienced by university students in the Malaysian context
2. identify the factors that lead to English language anxiety.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There has been a good development of literature on second and foreign language anxiety over the past three decades. Numerous researches reveal that anxiety is one of the significant factors in second and foreign language acquisition (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986; Liu, 2006; Liu & Jackson, 2008; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). There are different causes of language anxiety. According to Horwitz et al. (1986) the primary causes of language anxiety are communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety. Communication apprehension takes place when the students lack mature communication skills although they have mature ideas and thoughts (Mohammad Bagher Shabani, 2012). It includes oral communication anxiety, such as difficulty in speaking in groups, stage fright, and receiver anxiety such as difficulty in listening to or learning a spoken language. Fear of negative evaluation refers to students' distress over their negative evaluations, avoidance of evaluative situations and the expectation that others would evaluate oneself negatively (Watson & Friend, 1969, as cited in Horwitz et al., 1986). Test anxiety is defined as "the tendency to view with alarm the consequences of inadequate performances in an evaluative situation" (Sarason, 1978, p. 214).

Apart from that, Young (1991) listed six potential sources of language anxiety, namely, (a) personal and interpersonal anxiety, (b) learner beliefs about language learning, (c) instructor beliefs about language teaching, (d) instructor-learner interactions, (e) classroom procedures, and (f) language testing. Young (1992) further explicated that there are some factors which may also cause language anxiety among learners. The factors include students' own coping skills, motivation, attention, self-concept, the specific teaching methodology learner experiences and cultural factors. On the other hand, Oxford (1999) also listed a few causes of language anxiety such as self-esteem, tolerance of ambiguity, risk-taking, competitiveness, social anxiety, test anxiety, identity and cultural shock, beliefs, classroom activities and methods, and instructor-students' interactions.

Learning a second or foreign language is not always an enjoyable and anxiety-free experience (Zhang, 2001). Several researches have shown that language learners are generally different in their demonstrations of anxiety (Horwitz, et al., 1986). MacIntyre and Gardner's (1994) study which involved college students learning French, revealed that high anxiety students experienced difficulty in expressing their views and tended to underestimate their own abilities. Not only that, Liu's (2006) study of English for Foreign language anxiety among Chinese undergraduate, showed that the students were anxious when speaking English in class. Students' level of anxiety increased as students responded to teacher or was pointed out to speak. Similarly, Khattak, Jamshed, Ahmad and Baig (2011) conducted a study on Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan (AWKUM) and found out that students were anxious about producing mistakes as well as being corrected by teachers. The students also felt nervous about failing exams.

In Malaysia, there were studies conducted to investigate second language anxiety among universities students. Rahil Mahyuddin, Noran Fauziah Yaakub and Habibah Elias (1994)'s study determined the level of English learning anxiety among 1215 undergraduates from Universiti Putra Malaysia. The results of the study showed that majority of the students have

negative perceptions towards English learning. Students with high anxiety experienced great fear in communicative and anticipated encounter, and thus not speaking at all during English classes. When demanded to speak, students were shy, embarrassed, uncomfortable, reticent and have no confidence.

Similarly, Darmi and Albion (2012) also reported that the most frequent factor of anxiety for Malaysian language learners is fear of negative social evaluation and communication among the 205 Malaysian undergraduates of a public university. Their study indicated that students worried very much if they might fail the English course and if they are being corrected by their English teachers. Besides, students' level of anxiety were also very much affected by their feelings of reticence, shyness, introversion, and social anxiety that influence their ability to communicate. The results of their study also highlighted that students' emotions can be debilitating and learners' beliefs about the nature of English language learning are not easy to change. Apart from that, Siti Faridah Kamaruddin and Nabilah Abdullah (2015) conducted a study that involved 125 university students to find out students' level of anxiety towards English language learning. Their findings revealed that majority of the university students had moderate level of self-perceived anxiety in English language classes. Interpersonal and personal communication is one of the significant causes of students' anxiety. Students were anxious when the instructors expect them to be proficient in verbal and written interactions. They would prefer to remain quiet to save their embarrassment if they commit any language mistakes. Other causes of students' learning anxiety are such as cultural emphasis on having a positive outlook and saving face.

In general, the above local literature suggests that Malaysian students' second language anxiety level is rather high. Communication apprehension seems to be the major cause of students' second language learning anxiety although Malaysian students are enculturated in the English as second language (ESL) situation where speaking in English and taking oral English tests are the common practices. However, there are other possible reasons that cause students' learning anxiety when studies were conducted in different countries and settings because language anxiety is "multi-dimensional where it affects students differently depending on the context of the situation" (Ayu Rita & Nadhia Dalila, 2008, p.76) and it is of a dynamic nature where language anxiety can affect students in several different ways (Pappamihiel, 2001). In view of the importance of anxiety and the causes of learning anxiety that could varied in different setting and context, this study seeks to examine the students' level of language learning anxiety and its factors in a lecture setting.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The study was conducted on first year Diploma students from Faculty of Engineering, Public Administration and Business Management. There were a total of 149 students involved in this study.

Research Instrument and Data Analysis

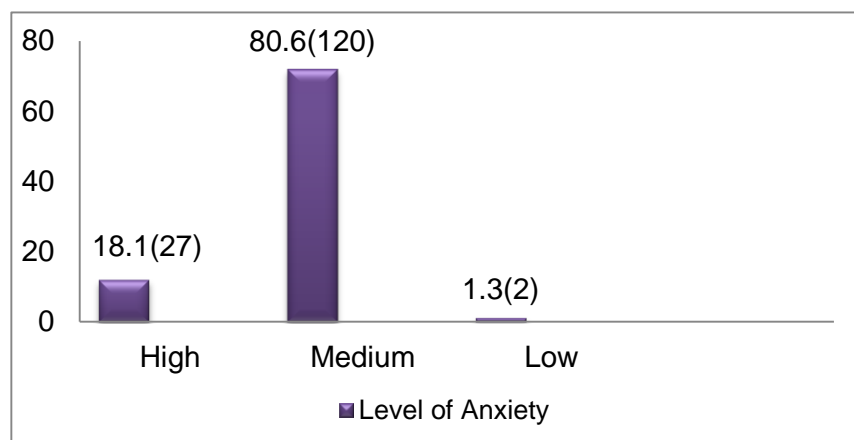
For the purpose of this study, a set of questionnaire was adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) which is developed by Horwitz et al. (1986). FLCAS is based on the analysis of potential sources of anxiety in a language classroom. The FLCAS has been extensively tested and widely used to investigate not only foreign language learning anxiety (Aida, 1994; Matsuda & Gobel, 2001), but also second language learning anxiety (Chan, Ain Nadzimah & Nurkarimah, 2012; Darmi, & Albion, 2012). This is due to the dependability of the questionnaires to be used in all language learning (Mahfuzah Rafek, Nur Hani Laily Ramli, Halimatussaadiah Iksan, Nurhazlin Mohd Harith & Athirah Izzah Che Abas, 2014). The three items presented in the FLCAS, namely, reflective of communicative apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation, are relevant and applicable in the context of second language learning. The constant use of FLCAS suggests that it is a reliable tool to measure and verify the anxiety level in second language learning (Kondo & Yang, 2004).

The FLCAS scale includes 33 items, of which 8 items are related to communication anxiety, 9 items for fear of negative evaluation and 5 items to test anxiety. As for the remaining 11 items, they were categorised as anxiety of English class. The respondents were asked to rate each item on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”). The data obtained from the questionnaire is presented in the form of descriptive statistics which was analysed through SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science) version 22.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In accordance with the objectives, the findings from the questionnaire elicited responses regarding the level of anxiety as perceived by the respondents in their current position as English Language learners. The students’ overall level of anxiety in their current language learning process was obtained by calculating the total amount of respondents for each of the level.

As shown in Figure 1, majority of the respondents (80.6%) indicated they experienced a moderate level of anxiety in their current position as English language learners of the institute. A certain percentage of respondents (18.1%) show that they identify themselves as having high level of anxiety whereas only 1.3% of respondents are found to be showing low level of anxiety as learners of English. This finding indicates that the presence of anxiety is generally established in the specified context of study. It points out that the majority of the respondents, who are dominantly teens, do perceive themselves as having a moderate level of anxiety as reported by similar studies which investigated the level of anxiety among adolescent English language learners in Malaysia (Siti Faridah & Nabilah, 2015; Lim & Mardziah, 2014; Wong, 2009). This remark is also in tandem with the suggestion by Horwitz (1986) in which it is common to discover apprehensive language learners especially in language classrooms. A similar remark has also been made by Guiro (in Horwitz et al., 1986) in which anxiety is never too far away from a language learner’s mind as it is a deeply upsetting psychological proposition which intimidates a learner’s self-concept and world view.



Range:
 High : 165-122
 Medium : 121-78
 Low : 77-33

Figure 1: Level of anxiety

However, anxiety can be seen in a positive light. At the same time, a moderate amount of it might help create a sense of motivation for the learners to learn or to work harder in order to be proficient in the target language (Khairi & Nurul Lina, 2010). Lim and Mardziah (2014) argued that if students are found to be not anxious at all and are relaxed in their learning process, they may not truly learn any new things and cannot progress in their language acquisition process.

Referring to Table 1, it is found that the fourth type of anxiety factor listed in this study - “Anxiety of English Classes”, is the most impactful factor of anxiety as perceived by the respondents with the mean value 3.05. This is followed by “Fear of Test” (mean= 2.93); “Communication/Speech Apprehension” (mean= 2.72); and finally, “Fear of Negative Evaluation” (mean= 2.64).

The finding shows that most students who were enquired in this study perceive themselves as being apprehensive of the English classes that they have to attend for a total of 14 weeks.

Table 1

The Overall means and standard deviation of the components of FLCAS

Classified Factors	Means	Standard Deviation	Level
Anxiety of English Classes	3.05	0.396	1
Fear of Test	2.93	0.526	2
Communication Speech Apprehension	2.72	0.540	3
Fear of Negative Evaluation	2.64	0.715	4

In the following, the related findings for the four causal factors will be discussed.

Table 2

Percentages, means and standard deviation of the components of anxiety of English classes item

Anxiety of English classes Item	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean	SD
I am afraid when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in the English class.	10.1	34.9	38.3	16.1	0.6	2.62	0.901
It wouldn't bother me at all to take more English classes.	12.8	28.9	43.6	10.7	4	3.35	0.963
In English classes, I think of things that are unrelated to the lesson.	0.7	20.8	49	24.2	5.3	3.12	0.839
I don't understand why some people get so upset over English class.	7.4	32.2	49.7	8.7	2	2.66	0.818
In English class, I am so nervous that I forgot what I know.	8.1	35.6	35.6	16.7	4	2.76	0.993
Even if I am well prepared for English class, I feel anxious about it.	8.1	34.2	42.9	12.8	2	2.69	0.867
I often feel like not going to my English class.	1.3	10.7	35	30.2	22.8	3.64	1.007
I don't feel pressure to prepare very well for English class.	6	24.2	55.7	11.4	2.7	3.16	0.871
I feel tenser and have more pressure in English class than in other classes.	1.3	16.1	42.3	26.2	14.1	3.34	0.954
Before English class, I feel confident and relaxed.	8.1	22.8	55.7	12.8	0.6	3.24	0.817
I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules I have to learn to speak English.	4	19.5	65.8	8.1	2.6	2.83	0.730

*SA=Strongly Agree, A=Agree, N=Neutral, D=Disagree, SD=Strongly Disagree; SD= Standard Deviation

1. Anxiety of English Classes

The respondents are found to be feeling particularly unmotivated in attending their English language classes. In Table 2, the item "I often feel like not going to my English class" shows the highest value of *mean* out of all 11 items in the component. Horwitz et al. (1986) reported that such behaviour may be demonstrated by anxious students in the attempt to reduce their anxiety. This alarming finding shows that the students harbor negative feelings in their mind due to anxiety and might choose to avoid attending classes altogether as a way to escape their source of uneasiness.

Table 3
Percentages, means and standard deviation of the components of Fear of Test Item

Fear of tests Item	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean	SD
I don't worry about making mistakes in English class.	6.7	31.5	28.2	25.5	8.1	2.99	1.070
I am usually at ease during tests in my class.	1.3	18.8	62.4	14.1	3.4	3.01	0.711
I worry about the consequences of failing my English class.	24.2	44.3	23.5	6	2	2.15	0.918
I am afraid that my English teacher will correct every mistake I make.	5.4	14.8	40.3	27.5	12	3.24	1.033
The more I prepare for an English test, the more confused I get.	5.4	17.5	32.9	31.5	12.7	3.28	1.066

*SA=Strongly Agree, A=Agree, N=Neutral, D=Disagree, SD=Strongly Disagree; SD= Standard Deviation

2. Fear of Tests

The second factor, fear of tests, is also found to be a major cause of anxiety among the respondents. The majority can relate to the item "The more I prepare for an English test, the more confused I get" (m=3.28) based on Table 3. It is similar to the observation made in a study by Mohd. Ariff, Siti Rosmaini, and Hancock (2008) in which they noted that students have a high chance of being unproductive in preparing for their language tests due to their fear of those tests. Ohata (2005) also made a similar discovery in another study involving Japanese learners of English from Indiana University of Pennsylvania. The students stated that they felt agitated when they think about the need to organize their ideas as well as being mindful about grammatical errors in such a short span of time. This can be linked to the fact that learners in Malaysia are generally worried about failing examinations due to the emphasis placed on examinations as the indicator of their success in the field as well as being the deciding factor in enabling them to successfully advance through certain academics level or graduate from their academic institutions (Mohd Fadhli, 2015; Darmi & Albion, 2013).

Table 4
Percentages, means and standard deviation of the components of Communication/ Speech apprehension item

Communication/Speech apprehension Item	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean	SD
I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my English class.	12.8	36.9	41.6	8.1	0.6	2.48	0.836
I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in English class.	21.5	34.9	33.6	8	2	2.36	0.985
I will not be nervous when speaking with native English speakers.	3.4	15.4	43	31.5	6.7	2.79	0.908
I feel confident when I speak in English class.	4.7	16.1	42.3	30.2	6.7	2.85	0.941

I feel shy when speaking English in front of other students.	13.4	30.2	35.6	15.4	5.4	2.73	1.087
I get nervous when I speak in my English class.	12.8	35.6	36.9	11.4	3.3	2.58	0.977
I get nervous when I don't understand every word the English teacher says.	11.4	25.5	38.9	21.5	2.7	2.77	0.998
I feel easy when native English speakers are with me.	8.1	28.9	49.7	9.3	4	3.23	0.891

*SA=Strongly Agree, A=Agree, N=Neutral, D=Disagree, SD=Strongly Disagree; SD= Standard Deviation

3. Communication / Speech Apprehension

The findings in Table 4 show that a high number of the respondents perceive themselves as being confident and not anxious in terms of communicating or speaking the language (“I feel easy when native English speakers are with me”, $m=3.23$; “I feel confident when I speak in English class”, $m = 2.85$). However, respondents also reported that they will start to get nervous if they cannot comprehend the meaning of certain words in the communication (“I get nervous when I don't understand every word the English teacher says”, $m=2.77$). Overall, the ability to communicate in a certain language is an indication of the individual's self confidence in communicating with other people in real life. As stated by Horwitz et al. (1986), language use indicates that communication must take place in one way or another, and people who can feel anxious even at the prospect of having to communicate with other people can be expected to feel even more anxious while communicating in a second or foreign language to another individual. Another notable statement which can be related to communication apprehension among learners in the Malaysian tertiary-level context is stated by Chan, Ain Nadzimah, and Nurkarimah (2012), in which they perceive that students in the Malaysian classrooms to be excessively guided by the instructor in controlled settings, thus causing them to be unskilled in producing automatic and spontaneous response commonly found in a typical communicative setting. This has resulted in learners being very anxious when they have to communicate with others.

Table 5

Percentages, means and standard deviation of the components of Negative Evaluation item

Negative Evaluation Item	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean	SD
I tremble when I know that I'm going to be asked to speak in English.	12.0	28.2	45	9.4	5.4	2.68	1.00
I think that my classmates' English is better than mine.	22.1	45	28.9	2	2	2.19	0.863
It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my English class.	11.4	26.8	35	18.1	8.7	2.87	1.097
I get depressed when I don't understand that the teacher is correcting.	7.4	23.5	46.3	15.4	7.4	2.92	0.981
I feel my heart pounding when I am going to be asked to speak in English class.	10.7	34.9	33.6	15.4	5.4	2.70	1.024
I always feel that my classmates speak better	24.1	41.6	28.2	5.4	0.7	2.22	0.896

English than I do.								
English class moves so quickly that I am worried about getting left behind.	5.4	16.1	38.3	32.2	8	3.24	0.991	
I am afraid that my classmate will laugh at me when I speak English.	12.8	26.1	32.2	21.5	7.4	2.86	1.102	
I get nervous when the English teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance.	28.2	43.6	18.8	8.1	1.3	2.15	0.987	

*SA=Strongly Agree, A=Agree, N=Neutral, D=Disagree, SD=Strongly Disagree; SD= Standard Deviation

4. Fear of Negative Evaluation

Although it is discovered as the least impactful cause of anxiety in the study, it is found that respondents are most worried about being left behind by everyone else as the pace of the English classes move on too quickly. The item “The English class moves so quickly that I am worried about getting left behind.” showed the highest value of mean (3.24) out of all 9 items in the component as shown in Table 5.

This perception most probably arose from the belief that they do not want to be labeled as being less proficient than the others or be negatively judged by them in a situation where their peers and instructors are constantly observing or monitoring them (Horwitz et al., 1986; Adeel, 2011; Jones, 2004, Liu & Huang, 2011). In addition, learners might be anxious of being left behind as they are afraid of being called by the instructors to answer questions when they are unsure of the overall track of class. Asian students, due to cultural factors, are typically afraid of the possibility of being embarrassed or being laughed at in front of other people in the language classroom (Ohata, 2005; Zhao, 2007; Liu & Jackson, 2008; Liu, 2007). They find the notion deeply unsettling as it will cause them to “lose face”, which basically translates to losing one’s dignity as it exposes one’s weaknesses in front of others.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that the level of anxiety among undergraduates of UiTM Sarawak is generally at a moderate level. They are found to be mainly anxious of attending English language classes overall. Therefore, to combat such anxiety among students, language instructors or educators can apply suitable and interesting methods of teaching in their classes to motivate their students as well as to alleviate the feeling of anxiety in the process of language acquisition. Fun and creative ways of instructions such as language games or the employment of pop songs in lessons can also be utilized in the language classroom to instill students’ interest. Finally, it is recommended for future researchers to focus on several aspects not covered in the current study such as language anxiety level in terms of gender differences, strategies applied by learners to cope with language anxiety, and students’ perception on language anxiety level for the four different language skills - Reading, Speaking, Writing, and Listening. By understanding anxiety and its effect on learners’ overall psychological perception, perhaps it could help to increase the rate of successful language acquisition among reluctant learners.

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About the Authors

Vicky Chin is a lecturer at Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA Sarawak, Malaysia. She holds a Master of Arts (Linguistics and English language Studies) and TESOL Degree (Hons) from Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Pulau Pinang. Her research interest lies in English language learning and teaching strategies and motivational strategies in teaching English.

Ting Hie Ling is a lecturer at Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA Sarawak, Malaysia. She holds a Master of Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages (TCSOL) from East China Normal University and Bachelor of Arts (Foreign Language) from University Putra Malaysia. Her main area of research is on Foreign Language Learning motivation and learning strategies.

Yeo Jiin Yih is a lecturer at the Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Sarawak, Malaysia. She received both her Bachelor's Degree (B.Sc TESL) and Master's Degree (M.A. Applied Linguistics) from Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. Her research interest lies in the area of language teaching and learning.